



## Tompkins County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

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### ***The Case for Space:*** **Tompkins County Needs an Off-Leash Dog Park**

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Tompkins County is continually touted as one of the great places to live, to raise a family, to enjoy the great outdoors. What makes our community so unique goes beyond the sheer physical beauty of the surroundings. It's even more than the fact that culturally and artistically, our community has all the amenities of a big city, without big city problems. Tompkins County's primary treasures are our neighborhood parks. Through the daily activities available in these parks, our community's culture, community, and well-being are continually being shaped. But in very few places can you share it all with your dog.

Take a stroll through an off-leash dog-friendly park and you will see dads and moms, kids and kites, and a frolicking dog or two—befitting the best images of Norman Rockwell. Off-leash recreation is not only an essential part of how many people care for their pets—it is a way to give a little something back to the animals who give us all so much.

**T**hroughout history, art and literature have depicted humans in all walks of life and social strata with dogs, illustrating their widespread acceptance in everyday life. Some religions even incorporated them into their worship. Indeed, dogs have long been admired for the purity of their character traits, with military annals documenting the wartime bravery and courage of dogs in the K-9 Corps.

Closer to home, our own culture is populated with examples of the well-established place dogs have found in our hearts and homes. People of all ages, but particularly the elderly and the young, enjoy their companionship. The emotional, physical, and social benefits dogs provide humans, however, do not discriminate against age, gender, or even physical well-being. For single people, dogs offer a welcome relief from loneliness. For children, an animal in the home contributes warmth and unconditional love, and

teaches responsibility and consideration for the needs of another creature. Those who suffer from disease or injury experience a therapeutic, even spiritual, benefit from their presence. For the lonely, a dog provides the incentive to get up in the morning—a walk in the park with their best friend may be the highlight of the day or week. For others, it is often the only daily exercise they get. And in an increasingly sedentary society, these benefits can enhance health and prolong life. Dogs also provide a sense of safety and security, allowing many people freedom they would not otherwise have.

Perhaps most importantly, dogs also contribute to a more positive environment in our community by facilitating communication between people. Studies have found that the presence of a dog increases the likelihood of friendly contact. This is especially true—and important—for people with mobility problems or other special needs that keep them socially isolated. Neighbors who would otherwise have little reason to speak to one another will stop and chat when dogs are present. This fact is an important ingredient in the formation of a community. There are countless examples of dogs introducing people to other people, thus leading to the formation of neighborhood groups, new friendships, and even marriage.

Dogs do so much good for the community: they give us a sense of optimism, safeguard us from depression and loneliness, and break down the barriers that isolate us from one another. Their presence improves our health, protects us from danger, and teaches us about caring and responsibility. And they ask for so little in return. While dog ownership may not be a fundamental right, it is unquestionably an integral aspect of our daily life—which cannot be dismissed lightly and should not suffer unwarranted limits.

### **What Do Dogs Need?**

As a society, we have yet to recognize and appreciate the emotional and psychological needs of animals. As a result, while our laws demand that a dog kept as a companion receive the basic requirements of sustenance and shelter, there is no way to guarantee that an animal receives love and attention. For the dog, the absence of attention and affection is tragic.

Because dogs, like human beings, are “pack” animals, they, like us, need to socialize in order to remain psychologically healthy. Keeping dogs isolated from one another goes against a dog’s most basic instincts. Dogs require daily exercise and contact with other dogs in order to remain healthy and well socialized. A well-socialized dog learns the skills required for getting along with the people and the other dogs he/she meets each day.

### **The Need For Off-Leash Parks**

One of the primary treasures in any community is its neighborhood parks. But what happens when you throw a dog into the mix? “In the beginning,” writes a dog lover, “there was a dog, a ball, and a piece of green...” And people came to a particular park to enjoy the open space, to spend time with like-minded dogs owners, to allow their dogs to exercise and socialize, to give something back to the cherished pets who gave them so much in return. But then they were kicked out.

The fight over off-leash dog space is not unique to Tompkins County. Battle lines over whether there is space enough to share our parks with dogs are being drawn in communities nationwide. Why does a community feel the need to keep dogs segregated from other park users?

***Anti-Social Behavior?*** Too often, the reason is fear that dogs will bite. One group, however, surveyed national dog bite statistics and found a definite correlation between the number of dog bites in a community and the availability of off-leash space. The more off-leash parks, the lower the incidence of dog bites. The reason is simple: Dogs socialize with each other through subtle displays of posture and behavior that can only occur when they are not impeded by a leash. If dogs socialize and learn appropriate behavior by interaction, then public policies that keep dogs segregated will only lead to an increase in antisocial behaviors. It is exactly when dogs are highly socialized that they learn to get along. Off-leash areas are therefore not only essential for the health and well-being of our pets, they are good public policy.

***Impacts on Wildlife?*** Another reason often cited is fear that dogs will impact wildlife. All animals, whether wild or domestic, are equally entitled to our respect, concern, and compassion. We also believe that each is entitled to a fair share of the natural resources necessary to preserve their well-being. We recognize that in some cases the needs of one species may conflict with that of another. In weighing these different interests, we feel that balance and fairness are necessary for a just resolution. Where the loss to one species is great, the corresponding need should be equally compelling. And no species should be asked to give up essential natural resources without such a demonstration. To burden one creature without benefiting another is, in our view, misguided and wrong. In the absence of actual study in a given location, there is often little basis for excluding dogs other than untested claims and conjecture.

***Scoop the Poop?*** But the bigger issue tends to be dog waste. Ask any nature lover, and they will tell you how they have picked up dirty diapers, bottles and other trash from their favorite trail. Should we close these trails down to picnickers or families with children? Should the actions of an irresponsible minority dictate public policy for everyone? Of course not. We should prohibit the behavior, through penalties for littering. If failure to pick up dog waste included stiff fines, the unwanted behavior could be regulated without punishing everyone. In fact, other dog owners who cherish the off-leash park would enforce the rule!

***Don't Fence Me In.*** There are many people who have polarized themselves on both sides of the off-leash issue, and public officials scrambling to appease constituencies have looked for a simple solution. And the one most often favored is fencing. "For every complex problem," wrote the social commentator H.L. Mencken, "there is a simple, easy solution...and it is wrong," to which fenced-off dog spaces are no exception. Too often, the size of the space is inadequate to support the need, and contrary to the goals of dog owners needing space to socialize not only with dogs, but also with each other. Because, in the end, the fight for off-leash space is not necessarily a dog issue.

***Just Don't Call it a Dog Park.*** A Seattle Council Member, originally opposed to the creation of off-leash park space, changed her stance after hearing testimony from both proponents and opponents. Her conclusion: “this is not a dog issue, it is a people issue. It is about recognizing off-leash activity as a valid recreational activity. It is about Seattle residents who pay taxes to support our park system, who willingly pay for those swimming pools, tennis courts and baseball fields that they may never use and who ask in return only that they be allowed in *some* places in *some* parks and to be able to engage in their favorite recreational activity.”

There is room in every community for at least one place where the people who love dogs can socialize. No one is asking for all parks. Only one—hardly a land grab from children, joggers, and other park users.

### **The Leader of the Pack**

For much of history, animals were considered mere commodities who pulled our wagons, provided the products for our farms, herded our sheep, and kept our barns free of mice. During the last century, however, socio-economic changes in society at large and our own unfolding humane ethic have produced changes in the status of animals as well. Many animals—dogs in particular—are now overwhelmingly *companions* instead of *servants*. In addition, government laws and services have evolved from promoting animals as property, to protecting them as cherished pets. And, in this regard, Tompkins County leads the pack.

Tompkins County is seen as one of the most forward thinking communities in the country. We are also one of the most pet-loving. Diners sitting at a sidewalk cafe will invariably include the family dog chewing on a ball or napping under the table. Family pictures on a mantel or desk at work often include the family pet.

We have an opportunity to rise above other communities who polarize themselves over the issue of off-leash park space. Tompkins County has the ability to demonstrate to others that recreation space is for all citizens, so that no one set of park stakeholders has the power to drive another set from the parks.

The Tompkins County SPCA believes that dogs and other park users, particularly children, are compatible. Not only have children and animals always been natural companions, children learn responsibility and develop an important sense of kindness from their interaction with dogs. It is our belief that many park interests can safely and effectively use such areas concurrently. \*

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\* For more information on dogs and dog issues, visit our “All About Animals” section on the internet, by clicking on “It’s a Dog’s Life” at [www.SPCAonline.com](http://www.SPCAonline.com).